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AUTHOR Pettigrew, B. Joye
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses several novels written by black American writers that deal with the initiation experiences of young blacks, and should, therefore, appeal to black adolescents. The novels are grouped according to the three stages in the initiation experience of the adolescent: separation; transition; and incorporation. In separation, the adolescent usually goes through some kind of experience in which his family situation is changed or the ties of belonging are cut in some other way. Transition is defined by the adolescent-initiate's awareness of his emerging sexuality. Incorporation is characterized by the acceptance or rejection of society by the initiate. The books discussed are: "Boy at the Window"; "Hog Butcher"; "Beetlecreek"; "The Learning Tree"; "Sissie"; "Brown Girl, Brownstones"; "Go Tell It on the Mountain"; "And Then We Heard the Thunder"; "Native Son"; and "Invisible Man." (CL)

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THE ARCHETYPE OF INITIATION IN SELECTED NOVELS OF BLACK ADOLESCENCE

B. JOYCE PETTIGREW
Winthrop College, South Carolina

No one today denies the value of teaching literature by black American writers. As Darwin Turner so aptly puts it, "Afro-American literature is good literature which illuminates a significant experience of American life and which can be used as effectively as any other literature to educate and to entertain."[1]

No one denies either that there are many problems confronting the teacher of black literature whether the teacher be black or white. One of these problems is the selection of materials to teach. Knowing what is available for teaching is becoming somewhat easier since the publication of such books as Barbara Dodds' *Negro Literature for High School Students* (NCTE), Charlemae Rollins' *We Build Together* (NCTE), and Darwin Turner's bibliography *Afro-American Writers.* Anthologies like Turner's *Black American Literature: Essays, Fiction, Poetry*, Sterling Brown's *The Negro Caravan*, Herbert Hill's *Soon, One Morning*, Abraham Chapman's *Black Voices*, and Emanuel and Gross' *Dark Symphony* are storehouses of varied materials for classroom use. It is this problem of knowing what is available for teaching that this paper deals with. I should like to discuss for you several novels written by black American writers that may be used for classroom study or, probably more appropriately, for individualized reading. These novels all deal with the initiation experiences of young blacks and should, therefore, appeal to black adolescents, who are themselves undergoing their own initiation into the society about them. In addition, the initiation experience itself is a universal one and should appeal to all adolescents, black and white.

The archetype of initiation has been the subject of much research lately, especially its depiction in literature. Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* treats the hero's search for identity in terms of a monomythic adventure which divides itself into three stages: Departure, Initiation, and Return. Hugh Agee, in his unpublished doctoral dissertation "The Initiation Theme in Selected Modern American Novels of Adolescence" and, more recently, in an article for *English Journal*, examines the initiation experience in terms of its depiction in contemporary novels from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to *The Adventures of Augie March*. He found that in the American novel the initiation experience of the adolescent follows the stages of Separation, Transition, and Incorporation. He also found that in literature each stage is characterized by a particular kind of experience. In Separation, the adolescent-initiate usually goes through some kind of experience in which his family situation is changed – a parent dies or the protagonist leaves home – or in some other way the ties of belonging are cut. The second stage, Transition, is defined by the adolescent-initiate's awareness of his emerging sexuality. The final stage, Incorporation, is characterized by the acceptance or rejection of society by the adolescent-initiate. This acceptance or rejection is in keeping with the adolescent's view of the world and his role in it.[2]

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In considering the novels of black adolescence to be discussed, one must keep in mind that the initiation experience is a continuing process and that the three stages proceed on a continuum. Some of the novels discussed will emphasize one stage in particular, some will denote a transition from one stage to the next, and some will

depict the entire process of initiation. For the following discussion the novels are grouped according to the major change that occurs in the development of the adolescent-protagonist; however, some overlapping may be noted.

SEPARATION: THE CALL TO ADVENTURE

The first stage of the initiation experience, SEPARATION, is the period in which the hero-initiate is cut off from the world of childhood and makes ready to embark on his journey of experience that will eventually lead him into the world of adult responsibilities. The protagonist in a novel of separation is usually very young; those examined in this study range from 9 to 14. Each novel in this group seems to focus on one major episode in the life of the young protagonist which signals the end of childhood and the beginning of the life adventure. In keeping with Agee's findings, this focal event is related to an "other-than-normal" family condition.

Death – natural or violent – seems to play a large role in the separation experience of the young protagonists in this group of novels. Coin Foreman, the nine-year-old hero of *Boy at the Window*, is physically separated from his family by the death of his mother. His father and his older sister are unable to hold the family together, and young Coin is sent to live with and work for his uncle in Washington, D.C. As he prepares to leave his home in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, he becomes aware of a feeling of not-belonging.

In *Hog Butcher*, Wilford Robinson, aged 10, is led to his experience of separateness by death also. He and a young friend witness the accidental shooting of a black athlete by two policemen. An inquest into the shooting causes Wilford to take the stand and to testify to what he had seen in spite of the threats made by officials against him and his mother.

Death is an ever-present part of the scene in *Beetlecreek*. Johnny Johnson, the young initiate, is sent to Beetlecreek to live with his uncle and aunt because of his mother's grave illness. While there he hears the call to adventure, but unlike the other initiates of the novels of separation, he refuses to answer the call. The price that he must pay for this refusal is symbolized by an act of murder on his part.

Death and violence seem then to play an important role in the first stage of the initiation process of the young black initiate. Another important part of this early stage is the appearance of the initiatory priest who will guide the young initiate through the perilous experience of initiation.

Coin Freeman (*Boy at the Window*) is led to a satisfactory initiatory experience by the help of his friend Ferris and by the loving memory of his dead mother. Ferris talks of his own mother's name appearing in the Bible and Coin searches the scriptures to find that of his mother. In the book of Ruth, Coin discovers his mother's name, Naomi, and in reading the beautiful story of Ruth and Naomi, he finds the words that will guide him and shield him on his dark journey into the regions of the unknown, into life.

Larry Atkins, a black policeman, gives Wilford Robinson (*Hog Butcher*) the support that he needs in a most difficult experience. It is Larry who finally acknowledges that he and his white companion might have shot the wrong man by accident. Larry sacrifices his own career so that this little black boy can have a chance to grow up with courage and with self-confidence. Larry sees Wilford as an example of the new hope of his people.

All aspiring initiates do not have the help of an initiatory guide. They, like Johnny Johnson (*Beetlecreek*), are destined to failure and to the psychic nightmare of an incomplete initiation. There are two figures in Johnny's life that could serve as his

guide, his uncle David Diggs and an old white recluse Bill Trapp. Both of these men, however, are too damaged by their own life experiences to offer any help to Johnny. He turns in desperation to a gang of young boys – the Nightriders – and they in turn lead him to his own destruction. In order to join their group, Johnny must set fire to the house of the old recluse. In doing so, Johnny deliberately murders the old man. Johnny is truly a lost, disintegrating self, for there was no one to lead him outside himself and he was too weak to break out on his own. Johnny is unable to answer the call to adventure and is left in the nightmare world of his disoriented psyche.

TRANSITION: THE CRUCIAL STRUGGLE

The second stage in the initiation process is TRANSITION, or the crucial struggle of the initiate's awareness of his own emerging sexuality. This struggle may be seen in terms of his confrontation with the Goddess-figure of Campbell's monomyth and the bestowing of her gift of unselfish love to protect the initiate in his later battles of survival, especially in that with the ego-shattering father-figure. Campbell's Goddess may take the form of "mother, sister, mistress, bride,"[3] and in these novels of adolescence she most often assumes the role of mother. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell describes the various roles of the Universal Mother, or Magna Mater as those of (1) the good mother, (2) the absent mother, (3) the forbidding, punishing mother, (4) the possessive mother, and (5) the forbidden mother.[4] Several of these roles are pictured in the black novels of transition.

Sarah Winger (*The Learning Tree*) is an example of Campbell's comforting, nourishing, "good" mother. She is the source of strength for her son Newt as he grows from a boy into a young man. She is especially comforting to him when he is forced to make a decision that will affect not only his own life but also the lives of his neighbors. Newt has witnessed the murder of a white farmer by a black handyman. Sarah stands by her son and encourages him to testify in order to save an innocent white man from being punished for this crime. Newt does even though they both fear the reactions of the town when it learns that the murderer is black. Sarah continues to be a source of strength to her son even after her death. Inspired by his mother's confidence in him, Newt is able to overcome his ultimate fear of death by sleeping beside his mother's casket. Conquering this last fear, Newt is able to face the life ahead of him as he leaves his "learning tree" – Cherokee Flats, Kansas – to live with his sister in the North.

Another representation of the Universal Mother, and at times more influencial than the good mother, is the "bad" mother. Selina Boyce (*Brown Girl, Brownstones*) must cope with the possessive face of the bad mother before she can successfully complete her initiation experience. Selina's life had become a battleground between the opposing forces of her mother and of her father. She had always sided with her romantic, easy-going father, but she comes to realize after his death that she is truly her mother's daughter. As Selina grows into young womanhood, enters the university, and falls in love with a replica of her father, she begins to realize, as Campbell suggests, that the good mother and the bad mother are really the same. With this new understanding of herself and her role in society, Selina is able to acknowledge the gift of the Goddess – her mother's strength and ability to endure in a hostile world. Thus armed, Selina is prepared to face the world outside her Barbadian community.

John A. Williams explores this good-bad nature of the black mother in his novel of family life, *Sissie*.[5] As the story of Sissie and her two now-grown children, Ralph and Iris, is told in flashbacks, this dual nature of the black mother and its effects on her children is vividly described. Ralph, who has been able to come to terms with his mother's influence and to find the love so necessary to his self-development through his relationship with his second wife, Eve, has survived his initiation with few psychic

scars. His sister Iris is not so fortunate. She still bears the scars that resulted from her mother's refusal to claim her as the legitimate child of her father. This barrier between mother and daughter is confronted in their last interview before Sissie's death. With her mother's death, Iris is able to face her problem and begin to work out a solution that will release her from her fears and guilt and that will enable her to complete the process of her initiation.

A second phase in the TRANSITION stage of initiation is what Campbell terms "Atonement with the Father."[6] This is the hero initiate's realization that the mother, the father, and the hero, himself, are all reflections of the total Self. With this realization, the fragmented parts of the Self are fused together by love into one whole, completed Self. This wholeness of Self allows the hero-initiate to function positively in the society about him. John Grimes (*Go Tell It on the Mountain*) attempts this at-one-ness with his stepfather through the medium of a religious conversion on Johnny's fourteenth birthday. This turning to the "spiritual" father represented by the Christian Church is indicative of the role which the Church has played in the Negro's search for identity and self-knowledge. Johnny's attempt is not successful. In terms of the initiation archetype, Johnny's failure is linked with his stepfather's inability to serve as initiatory priest and his mother's failure to provide him with the necessary boon of love. Johnny's failure at atonement is also indicated by his not-quite-normal relationship with Brother Elisha, a young lay preacher. John Grimes has not been able to cope successfully with his own emerging sexuality, the vital experience in the transitional phase of the initiation process.

In these novels of transition those initiates – like Newt Winger, Selina Boyce, and Ralph Joplin – who have met the Goddess and have wrested from her the boon of love go on to the final confrontation with the ego-shattering father-figure and emerge from their intitiation experience as a complete, unified Self. They survive their experience of initiation and because of their positive self concept, they are able to face, successfully, the encounters that they will have with the society about them even if that society is hostile to them. However, not all of the initiates are as fortunate. Some, like Iris Joplin and John Grimes, have not survived their confrontatons without serious damage to their concept of Self. Their survivals are more tentative. Their ability to function, or succeed, in society will be dependent upon the extent of the damage done to their psyches by their "crucial struggle" of initiation.

INCORPORATION: THE JOURNEY COMPLETED

The final stage in the initiation process is INCORPORATION, the acceptance or rejection of society by the initiate. This acceptance or rejection is based upon the initiate's own image of Self, which, in turn, is determined by the world-view he acquires during the experience of initiation. John Oliver Killens' novel *And Then We Heard The Thunder* serves as a good illustration of this final phase of initiation. The protagonist, Solly Saunders, Jr., is a young man in his early twenties and near the end of his initiation experience. As a soldier in the U.S. Army during World War II, Solly is determined to do his job well and to rise to the top of his regiment much as he had done at school and as he hopes to do in business after the war. He does not count on the obstacles that will be placed in his way by the white officers and his black comrades. The war he must fight is an internal one and is objectified by the conflict between the white and the black soldiers of the American Army. Solly is aided in his struggle for a complete, whole Self, or Manhood, by the love of a young black teacher. Whenever he must make a decision that will affect the results of his struggle, he thinks of Fannie Mae and her admonition to maintain his self-respect at any cost. Solly is also greatly influenced by Richard Wright's *Twelve Million Black Voices* and, through its reading, gains a respect for those black men that have gone before him and, conversely, for those that will follow. Armed with self-respect gained from Fannie Mae and race-

respect gained from Wright, Solly is able to survive the massacre between black and white soldiers that occurs in Bainbridge, Australia, on Easter Day. Solly knows that the only hope for his society is through respect for one another's differences and that love is the key to this respect. He plans to write a novel after the war that will serve to help others to understand this lesson just as Wright's book has helped him to understand. Solly has completed his initiation and emerges with a whole self-image, but he is not able to be incorporated into his society. He has tried by seeking promotions and successes in his Army career, but his manhood rejects the role a white-dominated society has assigned to him. He does, however, because of his positive self-image, visualize a New World in which he and the other members of his race can assume their rightful roles, in which they can truly be counted as men.

All of the initiates discussed thus far have faced a hostile world upon the completion of their initiation, a world that will not accept them or to be acceptable to them. However, if, like Solly Saunders, they have survived their period of initiation with an undamaged image of their own personal worth, they will be better prepared to function successfully in this society. Manhood, or Womanhood, is the gift to this younger generation. The possibility for change is there: it is the gift of their initiation experience.

Because of the sense of alienation experienced by the black initiate at the completion of his initiation, the contemporary writer is able to use the initiation experience of the black hero as a symbol of the modern existential man, who is also searching in an alien world for his own self-awareness. Two such contemporary black writers are Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison. Much recent criticism of both Wright's *Native Son* and Ellison's *Invisible Man* has emphasized the existential nature of each work.[7] Although the existential approach to the study of these novels is a profitable one, they can also be studied in terms of the archetype of initiation.

Wright's *Native Son* is the story of the initiation of Bigger Thomas. Bigger goes through the three stages of the initiation experience and each is recorded in a separate book of the novel. "Fear" records his separation from his family and his journey into the strange white-world of the Daltons. As a result of his fears and frustrations, Bigger accidentally kills Mary Dalton. When is crime is discovered, the black youth flees from the Dalton's world and in his flight undergoes a transition from a condition of fear and insecurity to one of a new awareness of his role in life. Book two, "Flight," illustrates this change in Bigger's life-journey. During this period Bigger struggles with the Goddess-figure, his girlfriend Bessie Meares, and does not win from her the boon of love. Instead, he rapes her and then murders her. Because of his actions, he comes to the final confrontation with the father-figure in Book three, "Fate," unprepared. His initiation then fails. This failure can be seen in the actions of Mr. Max, Bigger's Communist lawyer and the most likely candidate for initiatory priest. Instead of defending Bigger, the individual, Mr. Max uses the trial to defend all the Biggers created by the socio-economic conditions of that day. Jan Erlone, Mary Dalton's lover and another representative of the father-figure, attempts to help Bigger, but Bigger is unable to respond to the friendship and help Jan offers. Bigger's inability to love and to be loved has prevented the successful completion of the initiation process. Bigger is isolated with his hatred and cannot understand what has happened to him. As the novel ends, Bigger turns inward and harbors his hatred and fears, for they only are able to give him comfort and security as he awaits death. He has experienced the existential "freedom"; but without love, he becomes a victim, not a hero, of the initiation process.

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* illustrates a special function of the initiation archetype and should be reserved for the most advanced readers. Ellison records the experiences of the contemporary American hero-initiate by using the traditional arche-

typal motifs of the Sacred Marriage with the Goddess and the Atonement with the Father, but the motifs are washed of their traditional meaning and re-experienced in terms of the protagonist's own experiences. The tension between the despair revealed in the surface experiences of the protagonist and the affirmation implied by the underlying pattern of initiation and stated in the Epilogue make it possible for the protagonist to speak for himself and for his society. He is a unique individual who is re-experiencing the ancient *rites of passage.* His gift to society, obtained through the ordeals of initiation, is the story that he tells. By sharing with the reader his experience of initiation, the protagonist serves as an example of modern man, but not as a guide; and in doing so Invisible Man joins the other prototypes of modern man created by such writers as Joyce, Eliot, and Hemingway.

Although *Invisible Man* illustrates a special function of the initiation archetype, the protagonist's experiences do fit into the three stages of the initiation process. The protagonist is SEPARATED in the early chapters from his old life in a southern college. During his period of TRANSITION, the protagonist confronts the Goddess-figure in the guise of Mary Rambo and two unidentified white women and explores his own sexuality. After he confronts the father-figure, only to discover that he, himself, must act the role of father, the protagonist is ready to be INCORPORATED into his society through love for his fellow-man. The initiation archetype is the basis of the novel but it must be transformed by the creative force of the protagonist before it can have meaning to the modern reader.

A TEACHING NOTE

The novels discussed above are all concerned with the experience of growing up, the major concern of all secondary students – black or white. In addition these novels fulfill the functions of literature as set down by Walter Loban in a recent article:

> Through literature we compare, contrast, and clarify our own experience of life with that of the author. By responding to the sensitive and powerful organizations of emotion and thought by writers . . . , we extend our limited experience and become more intensely aware of its quality . . . [We] gain an "armed vision" of life, a balanced mature outlook free from naivete, narrow opinion, irrational erratic stances . . . [And] throughout all these basic functions of literature there flows an additional benefit, a source of deep pleasure, the enjoyment of literary artistry.[8]

One must remember, however, in considering these novels of black adolescence for use in the classroom that they were written for adult readers and are not junior novels. Their style as well as their content reflect their intention for a mature audience. Nevertheless, these novels can add much to the understanding and pleasure of secondary students when used by a teacher who is aware of the various pitfalls occasioned by the use of adult literature in a classroom and plans accordingly.

In selecting materials for classroom use, either as common or individual reading, the teacher is the best judge of the appropriateness of the book for the student; however, the following designations may prove helpful: the novels of Separation for the younger, less-experienced readers, the novels of Transition for the mature reader, and the novels of Incorporation for the most mature. There are, of course, exceptions to this general designation. *Beetlecreek* is a highly complex novel and not applicable to younger readers, whereas *The Learning Tree* and *Brown Girl, Brownstones* can be read with pleasure by less experienced readers. Regardless of the placement of these novels on the academic scale, they should, because of their emphasis on the theme of growing up and because of their individual literary merit, provide the quality of "real" life to the reading experiences of many secondary students.

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NOTES

[1]Darwin T. Turner, "The Teaching of Literature by Afro-American Writers," *The Promise of English: NCTE Distinguished Lectures* (Champaign, Ill. : NCTE, 1970), p. 95.

[2]William Hugh Agee, "The Initiation Theme in Selected Modern American Novels of Adolescence," (unpublished doctoral dissertation, The Florida State University, Tallahassee, 1966), pp. 169-171.

[3]Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1956), p. 111.

[4]*Ibid.*

[5]For a discussion of Williams' view of the dilemma of the black mother see the introduction to the Anchor edition, pp. vii-xi.

[6]See Campbell, pp. 126-149.

[7]See such articles as Richard Lehan, "Existentialism in Recent American Fiction: The Domonic Quest," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, I (1959), pp. 181-202.

[8]Walter Loban, "Literature and the Examined Life," *English Journal*, LIX (November, 1970), p. 1086.

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